

Being on our local church council is reacquainting me with how easy it is for otherwise mature human beings to consider forgiveness more lightly, less seriously, than the care and feeding of their negative feelings in particular and the sanctification of their feeling world in general: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by my feelings. I'm on our search committee: help us to find an excellent Pastor Feelgood." As though the sheer tonnage of society's negative affect requires the counterpoise of "upbeat" professionals, religious and secular; the counterpoise of a happy boy in the White House with upbeat speeches concealing downbeat behavior; the counterpoise of a happiness industry ("entertainment," "sports") draining off staggering amounts off time, energy, and dollars from the public. This general narcissism correlates with spreading loneliness, a divine signal that the oil for lubricating squeaky relationships--"forgiveness"--is being underused, underused because undervalued, undervalued because it requires the relativizing of feelings in the interest of relationships: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by my relationships. May I not let my feelings destroy them."

1. Forgiveness is the fulcrum between feelings and relationships. It is also the referee between them, not permitting either to dominate. The art of forgiveness is thus the heart of the art of living, and it is unwittingly discouraged in the present American society--with the result that most American "adults" are mere squabbling brats in a pathomachy (a feelings war) and treat their responsibilities, including the care and feeding of their relationships, as less important than "how I really feel" and (something supposedly discoverable only by consulting the oracle of one's feelings) "who I really am." Our favorite Cape Cod cartoonist loves to spike this. Here he is in today's CCT:



2. On the woo in "Annie Hall," Woody Allen says "I'm not much but I'm all I've got." You see him almost according the relationship a dignity superior to the holiness of his emotions--almost, period. The bottom line is that his feelings are all he's "got"; he doesn't "have" God, being without faith; he doesn't "have" the world, being without social awareness. Why wouldn't such a person, stereotypic in our culture, "go for it" when his/her feelings become embattled? Why wouldn't anyone standing over against this person's feelings either with contrafeelings or with suggestions/demands that this person take something other than his/her feelings as of higher holiness--why wouldn't this other be felt/seen as enemy, even demon?

3. So here goes my long-used definition: "Discipline is the systematic violation of one's feelings in the interest of a higher value" (eg, a higher order, a relationship, a goal). No higher value, no discipline; no discipline, no graduation from emotional kindergarten. The universal brathood of believers (and unbelievers)? Brats who, besides being self-retardates, are miserable and exude their misery onto others.

OVER

4. Sacred words are priests encircling the altar of the Holy. If one's feeling world is the Holy, one will associate with it such sacred words as "freedom" (in the expression, eg, "emotional freedom"), "authenticity" (eg, "affect authenticity"), "real" (eg, "being real" and "coming on real"), "honest" (eg, "honest feeling"), "straight" (as in "coming on straight"), and "affirmative" (the emotional attitude preached by Peale as "positive thinking"--see this cartoon, handed me by the pres. of NYTS with the comment, "Willis, you may find a spot for this in some thinksheet"--and by Schuller as "possibility thinking"). Any suggestion that feelings are only of relative value, one layer on the decision-making matrix, turns all these sacred words against you, turn^{ing} from tending the altar to closing ranks and about-facing, swords and shields on the ready. The same syndrome is seen in the cases of political issues --eg, abortion--that carry a load of "holy" feeling.

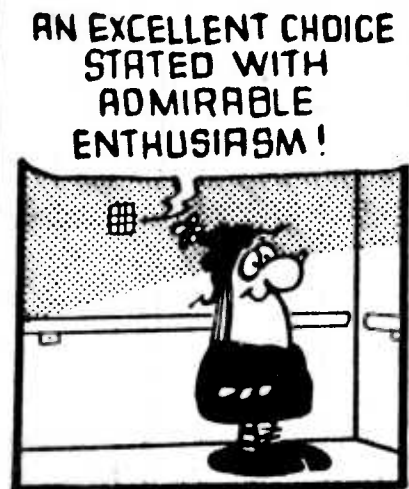
5. The title of my #528, which is for autobiographical journaling in group, is SHAME (AUTONYMY) VS. GUILT (OBEDIENCE). When one holds one's feelings as most precious, autonomy is the implicit lifestyle and shame is the primary negative reinforcer--as in Stoicism and the neo-Stoicism of Jas. Patton's IS FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE? In contrast, the Bible's call to obedience to God has as its primary negative reinforcer guilt. One way to put it is that we feel shame when others have disappointed us or we've let ourselves down; we feel guilt when we've disobeyed or betrayed. (#1009 delineates the Biblical paradigm of guilt/atonement.) (#1017 puts guilt/shame in the context of SEPARATION AND LOSS.)

6. Classics I love on the subject (and Patton doesn't even mention): H.R. MacIntosh's THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE OF FORGIVENESS & Wm. Klassen's THE FORGIVING COMMUNITY. The former is superb on what forgiveness costs God; the latter, on the congregation's potential for forgiveness.

7. Perry Smith's last words before execution (in Truman Capote's IN COLD BLOOD): "I'd like to apologize, but to who?" Imagine going out both with bad grammar and with no God to thank for life or ask forgiveness of for one's violations of life!

8. We are commanded to forgive and we are invited to be forgiveness-prone (as was the Prodigal Father).

Broomhilda



* The location of NYTS!